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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001047

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: SEN. COLEMAN MEETS WITH POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS  
LEADERS IN VENEZUELA

REF: A. CARACAS 1029

[1](#)B. CARACAS 1045

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR  
REASON 1.4 D

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Senator Norm Coleman (R-MN) visited Venezuela on April 1-3, 2005 and held talks with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, business and religious leaders, and representatives of the country's opposition legislators. President Chavez, according to the Senator was gracious and spoke of trying to improve the U.S.-Venezuelan relationship while at the same time continuing to accuse the U.S. of improper involvement in Venezuela's domestic affairs. In his meeting with the Senator, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez Araque was conciliatory saying that his job was to normalize relations with the U.S. Senator Coleman also met with leaders of Venezuelan Jewish community who told him that they had real concerns for their community, particularly if the bilateral relationship with the U.S. continued to erode. In a meeting with opposition legislators, Senator Coleman heard expressions of concern for the future of Venezuelan democracy and dismay over President Chavez's increasing control over formerly independent governmental structures. See reftels for reporting on Senator Coleman's meetings with energy companies and civil society leaders. END SUMMARY.

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Conversation with President Chavez  
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[1](#)2. (C) On April 2, Senator Coleman met with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez for nearly two hours at Miraflores palace. The meeting was attended by Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez Araque and Vice-Foreign Minister Maria Pilar Hernandez. The GOV excluded the Charge from the meeting, but the Senator did share some elements of the conversation. Senator Coleman said that Chavez had spoken about "turning the page" and of the good relationship he had had with President Clinton. (Embassy note: To our knowledge, Chavez never had a bilateral meeting with President Clinton. He apparently talked with him on the margins of a summit meeting.) Chavez had said that U.S. concerns that he is supporting destabilizing forces in the region are "ghosts, not real." The Senator said Chavez was at times feisty, at one point noting he could shut down Citgo, to which the Senator replied, "Well, you could also cut off your right arm."

[1](#)3. (C) Chavez pressed Senator Coleman on the issue of National Endowment for Democracy (NED) support for civil society organization Sumate (which the GOV regards as foreign interference in domestic affairs). The Senator said he had told Chavez that while he would study the allegations, he supported the NED. He also said that Chavez was interested in dialogue with the USG but within a framework of "respect". The Senator also reported that he had told Chavez not to "lose any sleep" over the rumors that the U.S. was trying to assassinate him. Although FM Rodriguez and Vice-FM Hernandez were present in the room, they were not part of the conversation.

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Meeting with Foreign Minister Rodriguez  
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[1](#)4. (C) Senator Coleman also met with Foreign Minister Rodriguez and Vice-Minister Hernandez in a hastily arranged meeting April 1, when the scheduled meeting with President Hugo Chavez was postponed. Charge and Econoff participated in this meeting. Senator Coleman told the Minister that the U.S. was willing to work with countries that respected the rule of law and democratic principles. Senator Coleman challenged Rodriguez regarding the recently enacted Venezuelan media law. Rodriguez countered that the press "cannot be outside of the law," and complained that the press

in recent years had been overwhelmingly antagonistic towards the government. In the near future, Rodriguez said, he hoped Venezuela would have a "normal press." Rodriguez noted that the U.S. and other countries need to "understand that Venezuela has a different scheme of democracy under its

constitution." When asked for his view on the future of U.S.-Venezuelan relations, Rodriguez spoke of the need for Venezuela to focus its energies on domestic issues. Rodriguez said "my job is to normalize relations with the U.S." and he reiterated his interest in bilateral meetings during upcoming OAS meetings in Washington.

15. (C) Discussing the oil-industry in Venezuela, Rodriguez dismissed the nervousness of the U.S. companies, pointing to ChevronTexaco as an example of a U.S. company operating in Venezuela with very good results. Rodriguez, who served as the head of the state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) from 2002-2004, also dismissed the idea that new agreements to supply oil to countries such as China would reduce the amount of petroleum sold to the U.S. According to Rodriguez, the additional oil being sent to China and other strategic partners would come from increases in production.

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Meeting With Jewish Community Leaders  
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16. (C) Senator Coleman met with leaders of Venezuela's principal Jewish organizations ) the Congress of Jewish Associations of Venezuela (the overall "political" voice of the community), the Jewish Union of Caracas (Ashkenazic community), the Jewish Association of Venezuela (Sephardic community), Hebraica (social and community center), and B'nai B'rith (fraternal organization). Senator Coleman mentioned his earlier meetings with President Chavez and FM Rodriguez as having a positive tone, but, of course, much would depend on the Venezuelan government taking actions to match its words. The Jewish leaders said that the period since Chavez took office has been "stressful" for their community, and that they found any prospect of the U.S. and Venezuela being "on a collision course" to be worrisome.

17. (C) The Jewish leaders said that historically Venezuela had been an "open society," without significant anti-Semitism. Venezuela's Jews have developed their own strong community institutions while being integrated into national life. Economic decline, accelerated during the Chavez government, had taken a toll in emigration, although, with the current oil-based recovery, it has leveled off. The Jewish leaders said that, like many other Venezuelans, they are deeply concerned about the Chavez government's behavior in terms of human rights, the judiciary, and democratic governance, but they have avoided taking any institutional position, leaving individuals to make their own political judgments.

18. (C) With one exception, they noted, they have not seen examples of the GOV targeting the Jewish community for harassment. They remained very disturbed about the November 2004 raid on the Jewish community's school in connection with the investigation of the murder of prosecutor Danilo Anderson. They noted that their complaint to Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel was met with bland responses regarding the independence of the judicial branch (although he did express regret at the incident).

19. (C) Their other chief concern as a community was the strong anti-Israel stance of the GOV and pro-government parties and other institutions, which sometime spilled over into anti-Semitic utterances. They specifically mentioned semi-official newspaper "Vea," as an offender. Its articles, they noted, are often read aloud on the state radio station, increasing their diffusion. After the highly publicized ceremony commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz, they noted, there was a series of articles in various pro-GOV venues linking the Holocaust to the suffering of the Palestinians. Senator Coleman responded that he was interested in the welfare of the Venezuelan Jewish community, and that he would not hesitate to speak up if it was threatened in any way.

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Opposition Deputies of the Boston Group  
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110. (C) Senator Coleman met with National Assembly Deputies Pedro Diaz Blum (Proyecto Venezuela), Leopoldo Martinez (Construyendo Pais) and Jose Ramon Medina (Primero Justicia) to discuss the Boston Group and its role in the present

political situation. The Boston Group, a bipartisan group with U.S. Congressional participation, is designed to encourage political dialogue in Venezuela. No pro-GOV deputies attended the meeting.

¶11. (C) Diaz explained that pro-GOV deputies did not attend because they had party commitments, and also many did not understand what was really important for the GOV. Diaz admitted that the Boston Group had not succeeded at modifying GOV behavior, but asserted that the group deserved continued support as the only forum through which opposition deputies could maintain semi-official contact with pro-GOV deputies. Diaz asserted that there were tensions between civilian and military elements in the pro-GOV bloc, and that the Boston Group helped the opposition maintain contact with the civilian side. Diaz said work with the civilians now would reap benefits should there be a future civilian-military split.

¶12. (C) Martinez also argued that the Boston Group deserved continued support, despite meager achievements to date. Martinez noted that as U.S.-Venezuelan tensions have increased, there has been more reluctance on the part of pro-GOV legislators to participate in Embassy events and the Boston Group. Martinez said some pro-GOV deputies are willing to admit in private that the legislative branch lacked resources to act as a strong independent power - but only after checking that they were not being followed by "Cuban intelligence agents." Martinez also denounced the existence of political lists in Venezuela, a "good" list of those who support the GOV and the missions, and a "bad" list of those who signed the recall petitions.

¶13. (C) Medina said the Boston Group had been an attempt to create the conditions of mutual trust which would allow the Assembly to carry out its constitutional functions to legislate, control, and debate. He said the Boston Group had failed politically, because pro-GOV legislators lacked independence from President Hugo Chavez and their party structures. He was not hopeful of the group's ability to significantly alter the political situation. Theoretically independent government structures, he said, are run by individuals more loyal to President Chavez than to the constitution or the nation.

¶14. (U) This cable has not been reviewed by Senator Coleman or his staff.  
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